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BEHIND THE SCENES

Ron Ridenhour, who wrote this issue's story about the CIA base in Arizona, first commanded attention not by covering news but by making it. In 1969, ten months out of Vietnam and a student at Claremont in California, Ron became an instant celebrity when the story of the My Lai massacre made headlines around the world. As the soldier who had brought the story out, Ron was the one legitimate hero to emerge from that horrifying episode in American history.

Exposing My Lai was no mean task. Ron had not been a party to the massacre itself—he'd heard about it from several friends who had been there—and it took him seven or eight months to track down all the

information he felt he needed. "It was," he says, "a standard job of investigative reporting, except that the circumstances were rather unusual. I was a combat soldier in a war. I had other things to do."

Once he had developed all the facts, Ron had another problem—what to do with them. "I knew I had to do something but I didn't know exactly what. Finally, I decided to flood the world with letters." He sent out scores of them, to the House, Senate and Pentagon, and after months of agonizing delays—and panic in the highest circles of government—the story finally hit the papers. The rest is, quite literally, history.

Ron, for his part, has very mixed feelings about the whole thing. "Obviously," he says, "in the final analysis there was a whitewash. But it is important that the story got out and that Calley was convicted. It's just that to place all the blame on this one guy is ludicrous. Now, I think he should be released."

After he finished school, Ron returned to Vietnam as a free-lance reporter and ended up doing a lot of work for *Time*. His technique was simple—he hung around the troops and listened carefully to what they had to say. As an ex-soldier, he was thus able to get hold of a lot more news than reporters who attended official briefing sessions in Saigon. "Also," he adds, "I was a little more familiar with the system and had a better idea when people were bullshitting or outright lying."

After a year of reporting the war, Ron returned to Arizona, where he'd grown up, and enrolled in Arizona State University. Ron stumbled upon the existence of the CIA base in typical Ridenhour fashion. About three months ago, while traveling on a train between Washington, D.C., and Virginia, he overheard a commuter, speaking in hushed tones, alluding to it. When he returned to Arizona, he got on the case.

"The people at Intermountain were suspicious," he says, "but because they were posing as a legitimate corporation, they had to let me in. From there it was easy. I just went in and played it straight. By the time they found out I was onto them, it was too late."

Of course, the Intermountain people were interested in knowing just how much he had on them. "Yeah," says Ron, "they pestered me a little. At one point Polly, the public relations woman, called and said, 'Golly, gosh, I'm really interested in what you're writing about.' Well, she'll just have to read it in the magazine."

Not that Ron believes that exposing the base will have much effect on CIA policy. "They might conceivably move to another base," he says, "if there's so much publicity about them that it impinges on their operation. But they'll probably just deny it. That's the way they operate."

George A. Hirsch

Yes! We have no Maranas!

By Ronald Ridenhour

On August 11, 1970, a small private plane was spotted on the outskirts of Tucson, Arizona, flying at an extremely low altitude over the city's National Golf Course. After two passes at 500 feet, the plane crashed and exploded, killing both men inside. A tragic though hardly unique incident, or so the citizens of Tucson thought at first.

But the crash turned out to be anything but ordinary. The FAA, instead of sending local investigators, dispatched a man from Washington, who refused to comment on the crash to any of the local papers. It was discovered that the plane, an experimental model of a Beechcraft S-32, had been on special lease to the Univac division of Sperry Rand Corporation, yet Sperry Rand would say nothing, either to the press or the police. The plane had flown out of Marana Air Park, a facility of Intermountain Aviation Inc. of Tucson, yet Intermountain also refused to comment. As a result, the interest of Tucson's news media began to quicken. There was talk of a "secret military mission for the federal government," and even some speculation that Intermountain Aviation's Marana Air Park was actually a CIA base.

Officials in Washington, however, quickly passed the word to the local sleuths, both public and private: no more questions about the crash—the security of the nation was at stake. The resulting cover-up was the only window, and a very small one at that, onto the real activities of Intermountain Aviation Inc. since its inception in the fall of 1961, for Intermountain happens to be one of the CIA's major stateside bases; it, and "proprietary corporations" like it, provide support for the Agency's paramilitary operations, operations which have, in the wake of the Indochina War and the Chilean coup, come under intense criticism. Though ostensibly private institutions and businesses, these "proprietaries" are financed and controlled by the CIA and use their commercial and sometimes non profit covers to carry out clandestine activities.

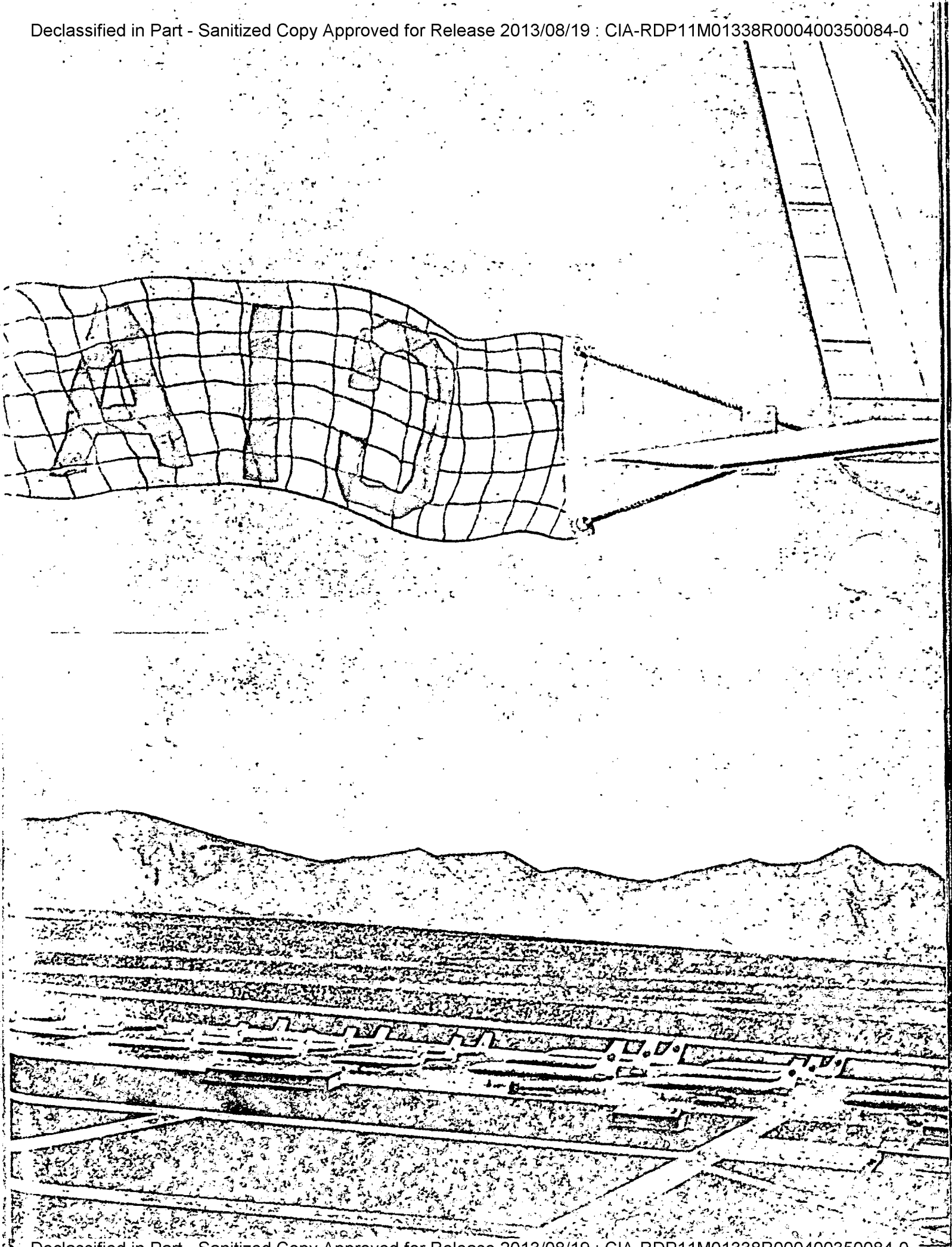
From the ashes of the Bay of Pigs disaster rose a splendid new CIA base outside of Tucson. The men who run it say they train forest firefighters, but they stand ready to put out—or start—brush fires of a far different order

"Intermountain," one former staff officer told me, "is no bush league operation, and you won't find bush league mistakes in its cover story." That is why the story has worked so well. As far as the outside world is concerned, Intermountain exists primarily to help train, supply and deliver the Forest Service's "smokejumpers," firefighting parachutists whose specialty is leaping into rough country from low altitudes to establish field camps from which remote operations can be carried out. The firefighting cover is vigorously promoted, Intermountain even going so far as to produce splendid motion pictures documenting the firemen in action.

But, as a quick study of Intermountain's annual corporate financial reports reveals, the cover does have holes, if you look for them. Beginning with June 30, 1971, and continuing for three reporting periods over two and a half years, the reports list exactly the same figures for all categories under assets and liabilities. This, to be charitable, is highly implausible. Taken at face value, what the reports say is that Intermountain did the same amount of business, down to the number of washers used, for three periods. Beyond that, according to the reports, the corporation paid no taxes of any kind to anyone during that time.

There are inevitably such slips in trying to sustain the cover story for such a massive enterprise as Intermountain, but to the CIA the benefits far outweigh the risks. If the U.S. insists on the capability for covert and guerrilla warfare, bases, both domestic and foreign, are essential. Intermountain itself can be considered the bastard progeny of one such operation—the Bay of Pigs. It was precisely to correct

ILLUSTRATION BY DICKRAN PALULIAN



the failures of the aborted coup in Cuba that the Arizona base was established. In their book *The Invisible Government: the CIA and U.S. Intelligence,* David Wise and Thomas Ross explain the causes of the Bay of Pigs disaster. The invasion, they say, originated as a plan to sponsor isolated guerrilla landings in Cuba which would evolve into a "pocket-sized invasion." By October 1960, high-level CIA officials decided to land a force of about 400 men on the island in late autumn to act as a "well-trained and well-supplied guerrilla unit."

The first supply airdrops to the unit began over the Escambray in November 1960, continuing through March and ending just before the actual invasion. Although the Cubans flying the CIA aircraft that made the drops thought they would be flying over friendly territory, they frequently encountered antiaircraft fire, causing some to conclude that the CIA's Cuban contacts were not what they were knocked up to be.

Forced to fly at higher altitudes, the planes were exposed to a much greater volume of groundfire and to the risk of considerable cargo loss due to wind drift. The windblown cargo frequently evinced guerrilla presence, pinpointing their patterns of movement, needs and sometimes intentions. Even when located, the widely dispersed loads increased recovery time, and thereby exposed the guerrillas to capture. Simply stated, the Central Intelligence Agency's inability to solve these problems was a prime reason for their failure to establish an anti-Castro campaign within Cuba.

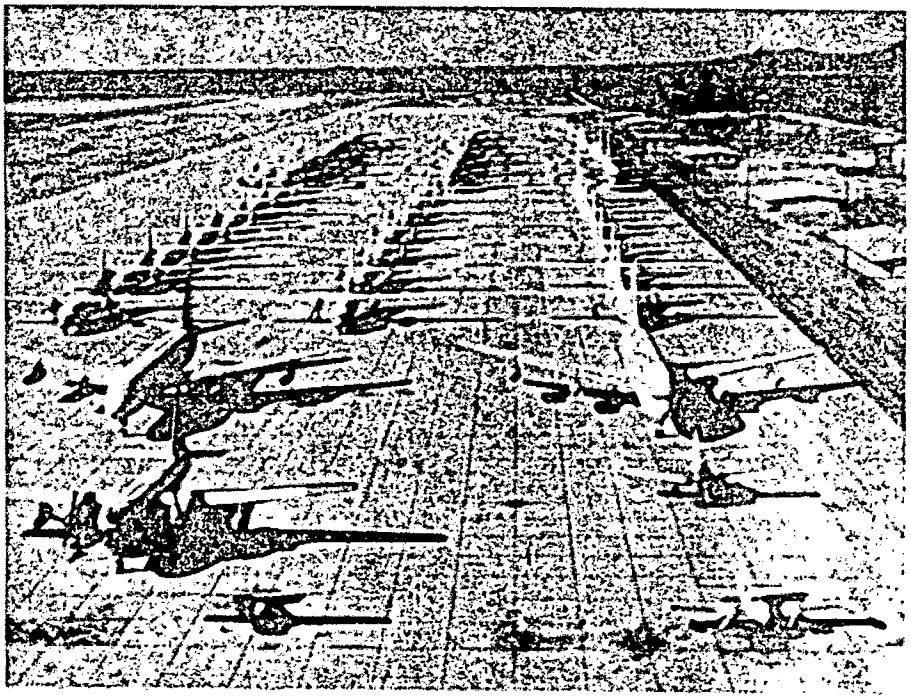
Enter Intermountain. During the November-March period, the Cuban pilots flying the Agency's frustrating resupply missions were given the telephone number of a man known to them simply as "Mr. G." If forced down outside Cuba, they were to telephone Mr. G immediately. Later, during the actual invasion, the CIA's top air operations adviser was a man known to Ross and Wise as "Gar."

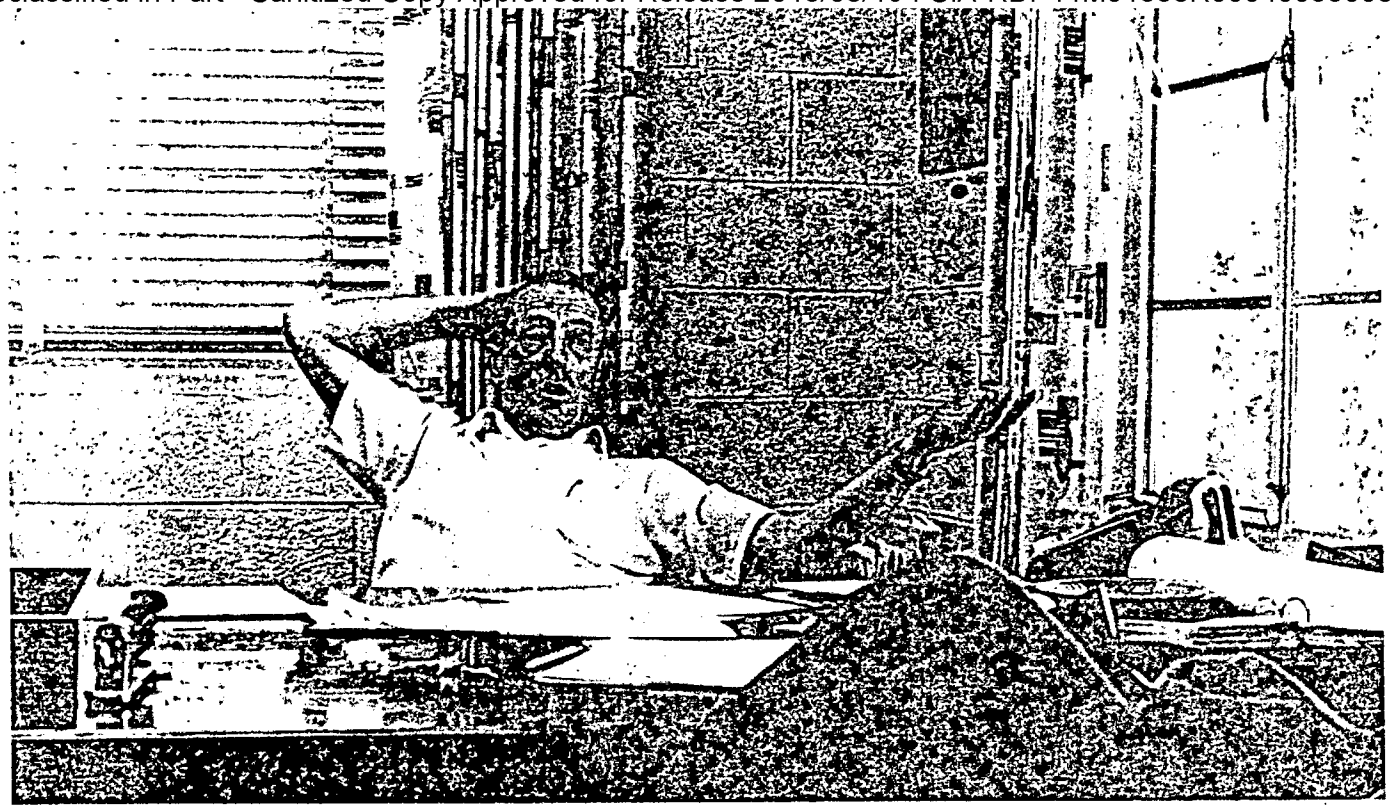
Exactly who the mysterious Gar was has never been divulged by the CIA. But in what one is loath to dismiss as a coincidence, the head of Intermountain Aviation is one Garfield M. Thorsrud, known to his employees either as "sir" or "Gar." A former CIA staffer claims that Garfield Thorsrud set up Intermountain as a proprietary CIA corporation just six months after the Bay of Pigs disaster. Today, Intermountain's air service delivers what its promotion people call "Total Air Support For Remote Operations." These capabilities, along with a number of Intermountain's other research and development programs, are designed to solve the technical problems found insurmountable in Cuba.

The aviation corporation provides a service and maintenance facility for all sizes and kinds of aircraft, with an apparently unlimited capacity for the reconfiguration of airframe, engine, armaments, avionics, fuel, cargo and passenger capacity. The entire aviation service/Marana Air Park complex is considered by CIA watchers to be one of the six major facilities that form the backbone of the CIA's aerial fleet—one of the largest in the world.

"Intermountain," says a former Agency staffer, "is no bush-league operation"

Marana Air Park's fleet: the conditions for mothballing are excellent.





PHOTOGRAPH BY DANIEL FOOTE

Garfield ("Gar") Thorsrud, Intermountain's president: was he the top air operations adviser during the Cuban invasion?

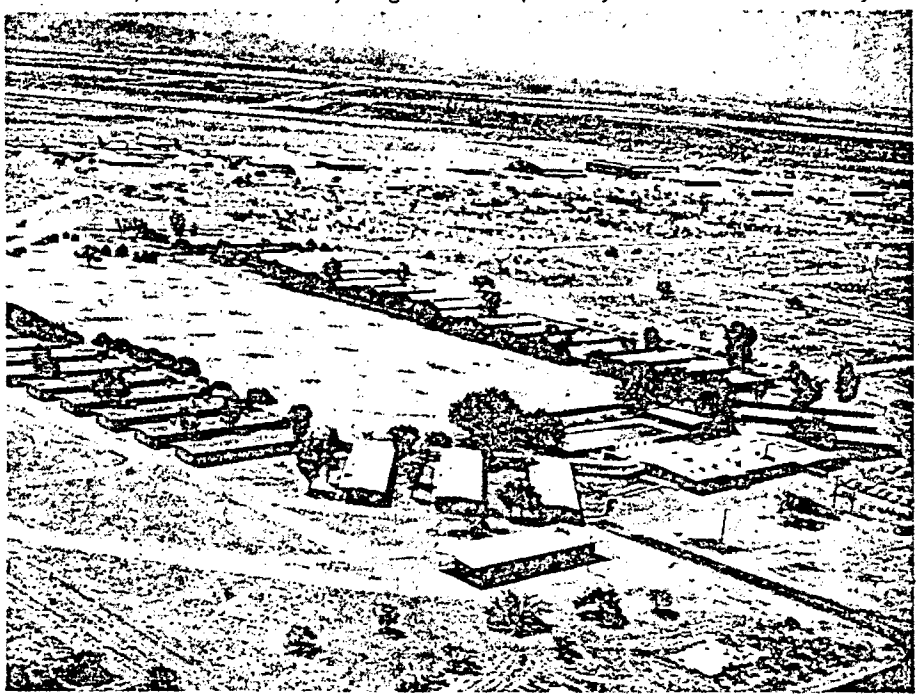
Of course, the people at Intermountain admit none of this. Their cover story, in short, is that Intermountain Aviation exists only to train firefighters for the Forest Service and to provide associated flying services for the Department of the Interior. Indeed, the Forest Service contracts are so important to Intermountain's cover that every time the big contracts come up for renewal, CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, takes on a crisis atmosphere. The Agency has to enter competitive bidding just like everyone else. It worries them a great deal. They have an abiding fear that one day the XYZ aviation company will underbid them. If that happened, they would be compelled to pull the hidden strings at their disposal. It would be no problem for them, of course, but they prefer not to. It might be messy or embarrassing. So they bid very low.

Knowing that John Marks and Victor Marchetti were about to publish their book, *The CIA and the Cult of the Intelligence,* I called Marchetti, a 14-year Agency man who was the Assistant to the Director of Intelligence when he resigned from the State Department in 1970, to inquire whether he had made any references to Intermountain in his expose of the Agency's operations. "Intermountain. INTERMOUNTAIN! Of course. That's it," he said. He had been trying to remember that name for a long time (he had identified the airline as Rocky Mountain in his original draft).

"Yeah, sure it's a proprietary," Marchetti went on. "In fact, John Clarke told me once that he considered the positions of staff-officer-in-charge of Intermountain and chief of station in Johannesburg, South Africa, to be the two cushiest jobs in the CIA." Clarke should know—he was the former chief of the CIA's Planning, Programming and Budgeting Office. In fact, added Marchetti, Clarke liked Intermountain so much that he even talked occasionally of retiring there.

The charm of Arizona for retiring is not new to anyone. But the charms of an Arizona-based CIA airline are less well-known. For one thing, Intermountain is located close to the Mexican border, making it a good jumping off point for CIA operations in Central and South America. For another, it enjoys Arizona's quiet political climate, the state's easily managed moderate and conservative newspapers,

Intermountain extolls the virtues of its "motel" facilities, which are two miles off the road, are not marked by a sign and are open only about ten weekends a year.



PHOTOGRAPH BY DANIEL FOOTE

"Intermountain has the aircraft, the personnel and the experience to perform air operations anywhere in the world"—that's what its promo film says

the defense industry's strong presence in the local economy and the area's cluster of like-minded military establishments.

Polly Terry, a tall, pretty blond lady dressed in spring green, had been Intermountain's public relations agent for only a month when she escorted me to Marana Air Park from Phoenix's Sky Harbor International Airport. Polly and her publicity campaign are part of Intermountain's move to deep cover. Her job is to solicit free publicity for the proprietary's cover operation, spreading half-truths across the land. I do not know if she knows the real story. In a way it does not matter, for that is not her job. She obtains her information directly from her clients, passing it on as gospel without bothering to check it.

Whether she knows it or not, Polly is a CIA "agent." Agents are people who work for the Agency on a contract basis, even though they may not know who their employer is.

The flight from Sky Harbor to Marana aboard an Intermountain Cessna 210 took about 20 minutes. The pilot, Dalton Livingston, was a former Air Force Reserve pilot from Birmingham, Alabama. Four American pilots died supporting the Bay of Pigs invasion, all of them former Air Force Reserve pilots from Birmingham. I doubt that it is a coincidence.

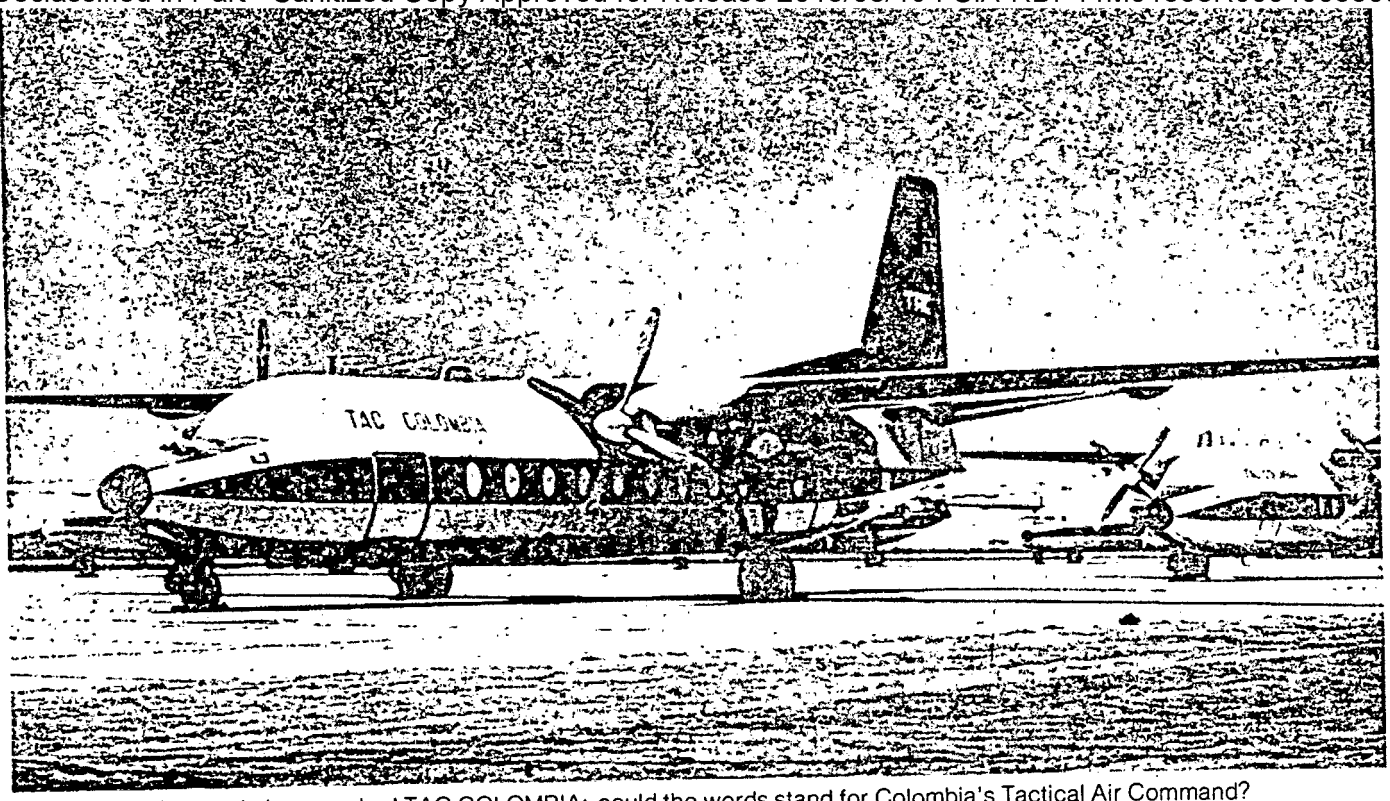
Livingston came in toward Marana over the top of Picacho Peak, coasting down to the base and then rolling in low around it, circling once to give us a good view of the dozens of airliners parked on concrete aprons. The view was right out of the photographs Polly had fed the Arizona *Republic* to accompany a feature-length story which had run in the March 31st Sunday edition under the byline of A.V. Gullette, associate business and finance editor.

There had been 90 column inches of it altogether, all of it singing Intermountain's praises, including a thinly veiled pitch exhorting the public's interest in Intermountain's potential as a hideaway motel. From top to bottom, it was the official story; according to the article, over half of Intermountain's business springs directly from contracts with the U.S. Forest Service. Included, of course, was the cover's official corporate history. The few inaccuracies in the story were not the fault of "Vince" Gullette. He did not write it. Polly Terry did.

But Polly omitted certain significant details. For instance, Intermountain's "motel" takes no reservations, is about two miles off the highway and has no sign posted. The cafeteria and bar are not open at all in the summer and in all other seasons are open only on those weekends when Intermountain's "convention facilities" are in use—that is, eight to ten weekends a year. Nor does it mention that the cafeteria and bar are only a slightly converted military mess hall—that is to say, they have changed the tablecloths, the wallpaper and the furniture.

A few minutes after we landed, Gar Thorsrud himself appeared at the edge of the airfield, hand outstretched. According to Polly Terry's biographical sketch, Thorsrud's association with Ma-

At Marana Air Park, planes frequently stop by for a paint job . . . or a whitewash.



PHOTOGRAPH BY DANIEL FOOTE

A stored plane marked TAC COLOMBIA: could the words stand for Colombia's Tactical Air Command?

rana began in 1955, when he took his Air Force pilot training there. A few years later, it says, he was doing research and development work at Sky Harbor for Robert Fulton, president of the Robert Fulton Company of Newton, Connecticut. He heard about Marana, investigated and wound up renting space and eventually leasing the whole facility in 1961. It is all very neat and orderly except that, according to the Arizona State Corporation Commission, with which Fulton would have had to register, Fulton and his company did not do business in Arizona in those years, nor do they do so now. But there was no time to talk about any of that with Gar. He fled with Polly after only five minutes, leaving Jack Wall, Intermountain's vice-president in charge of facilities, to take me for a tour.

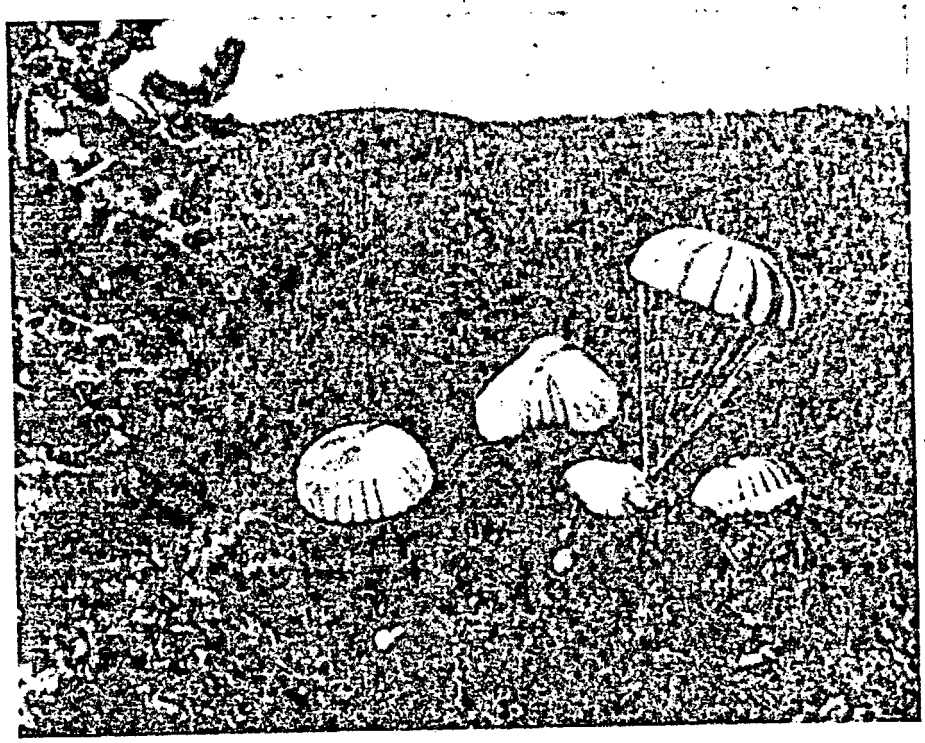
Jack led the way across 100 feet of open concrete to Intermountain's big hangar. Inside sat a "new" DeHaviland Twin Otter, a twin-engined STOL (short takeoff and landing) aircraft, ships Jack says are the backbone of their fleet. This one came complete with worn Spanish-language markings on the interior walls. The windows were still taped, protecting them from the fresh coat of white enamel recently sprayed over the craft. It was fresh from the factory, Jack said, stopping in the shop just long enough to have Intermountain's logo painted on.

A DC-6 sat on the other side of the hangar. It, too, was getting a face lift. Strolling under one of its big engines, Jack motioned back towards the smaller plane. "There are 4,200 hours between overhauls on these Twin Otter PT-6 turbines," he said, "where these DC-6 engines have 1,500 hour overhauls. The PT-6 is a hell of a lot more efficient. It goes a lot further on a lot less fuel with a lot less maintenance and a lot more reliability."

What Jack had not said is that STOL aircraft with just these capabilities have long been coveted by military and civilian intelligence agencies for their obvious potential in the conduct of clandestine activities. They can land with a full load in less than 500 feet in a forest meadow or a jungle airstrip.

The main hangar and two adjacent buildings also house sheet metal, machine, welding and avionics shops. Walking through, Jack pointed out the highlights—

The solution to the Bay of Pigs fiasco: Intermountain's precision cargo drop systems.



the paint room, the airframe materials inventory, the nuts, bolts, special aircraft tools. "This area is for the heavy aircraft," he said. "Then in the other hangar we have a similar shop for the helicopters and STOLs. We're pretty well rigged for most anything from the airframe overhaul end of things. I would say we are pretty much self-contained. We have a class four unlimited repair station certificate which allows us to do structural modifications on any type of aircraft. We can do jets right on down to the small things." Intermountain, through these shops, has the proven capability for complex airframe "reconfigurations," installation and repair of radar, infrared and people-finding devices, as well as the most complex troubleshooting for avionics, including inertial navigation equipment and even computers.

Leaving the hangar, Jack took me down past the rows of airliners parked three abreast on Marana's concrete aprons. They are stored there to take advantage of southern Arizona's excellent mothballing conditions, especially the heat and dryness, the year-round flying conditions, Marana's seclusion and the low tax base—not to mention the security. There are only two access roads. They are stationed with security guards, and a third guard station is being built along the runway. Most of the aircraft belong to American commercial airlines like Pan American, American, United and Allegheny, or to corporations such as Howard Hughes' Summa and *Forbes* magazine, but Intermountain also stores aircraft from countries like Panama, Argentina and Colombia. Storage is easily the most visible of Intermountain's activities, even if it comprises only 1.3 percent of their total annual income. The reason for the additional guard shack, according to Jack, is their clients' fear of the curious citizens from Marana's convention facilities.

"What Mo Udall told them was that he didn't care if they had a secret base at Marana . . . but that he ought to know just what the hell was going on there"

Jack then led me back to Intermountain's executive offices. He had two films to show, one dealing with the air service, the other dealing with the aviation company, both demonstrating the services supplied by Intermountain. The films are marvelously done in color, emphasizing the great natural beauty of the wilderness areas over which they are shot.

The first, the air service film, opens with an overhead shot of a DeHaviland Twin Otter, the aircraft Intermountain specializes in, and the only STOL they claim to use. The Twin Otter is shown winding its way down a twisting narrow valley filled with river. It is flying very low. As the soundtrack crackles along ". . . and can operate out of strips that conventional aircraft could not . . ." the Twin Otter swings abruptly around a sharp turn in the river and without warning sets suddenly down in a meadow amidst the forest. The meadow is barely a hundred yards long and there does not appear to be more than ten feet clearance between either wingtip and the forest: ". . . possibly use . . . the Twin Otter is a large airplane . . . gross weight of 11,579 pounds and can carry over 2½ tons . . . its reversible pitch props permit incredibly short landings even in rough terrain . . . rugged aircraft capable of operating from unimproved fields and all environments . . . high power to weight ratio and low stalling speed contribute to safe flying even in the most hazardous areas, and its two 650 shaft horsepower turbine engines are so quiet you can barely hear them approach. . . ."

The film grinds on, taking us through the rest of Intermountain's aerial stable, including a smaller STOL with a useful load of 2,300 pounds, capable of carrying nine passengers and crew. But the kicker, the detail that let Intermountain's secret out of the bag, is yet to come: ". . . For those situations where distances are too great, or loads are too heavy for helicopters and the sites will not permit landing by conventional or even STOL aircraft, Intermountain completes its air transportation array with aerial delivery capability. . . ." On the screen treetops are visible, seen through the rear gate of a C-7 caribou. The caribou is another STOL used principally by the American military for operating in remote areas, especially for support of guerrilla operations. The plane is no more than a few hundred feet above the trees when out the open tail door drops a line of parachutists. A classic guerrilla maneuver.

There is even more: ". . . has developed aerial delivery systems such as the side-door conveyor delivery system capable of dropping up to 8,000 pounds of cargo in isolated areas. . . ." On the screen appears a Twin Otter flying very slowly less than a hundred feet above a forest. Inside are two crewmen, plus a dozen big cargo containers loaded with parachutes and static lines and sitting on a curved roller conveyor leading to the side door: ". . . has achieved a high degree of reliability in dropping cargo and we support. . . ." The Twin Otter approaches a clearing in the forest, perhaps the length of a football field. The plane breaks over the clearing's edge, and the first cargo container goes out the door, with the others right behind it. As the Otter is cutting over the forest again, the clearing in its wake, a dozen puffy balls of cloth are left momentarily suspended behind it. Within a few seconds the first load lands in the

PHOTOGRAPH BY DANIEL FOOTE

The corporation's shop: an apparently unlimited capacity for the reconfiguration of airframe, engine, armaments . . .

clearing, its parachute immediately caving in. All 12 containers are on the ground in the clearing in not more than one minute.

". . . Whether airlifting cargo over long distances, transporting personnel to a primitive area meadow, conducting a survey team to an inaccessible mountaintop or dropping men and equipment on an isolated fire, Intermountain has the aircraft, the personnel and experience to perform remote air operations anywhere in the world. . . . Intermountain's fully equipped FAA approved para-loft . . . also manufactures various cargo parachute systems . . . a parachute delayed opening system for minimizing wind drifts for high-altitude drops . . . patented by Intermountain . . . para-wing . . . for use with the Magnavox automatic homing system. . . ."

According to Jack Wall, the para-wing/Magnavox R&D program was shut down last year and declared a failure. The goal had been to develop a homing system that would guide a load of material dropped at 30,000 feet and five miles off center to within several feet of a bleeping "black box." When "abandoned," the program had been perfected to the point at which a load dropped from 7,000 feet and half a mile off center could be brought to within 200 feet of the black box.

Intermountain delivers all the services it claims it does for the public. In fact, it provides for its clients just about everything it provides for the CIA—minus, of course, the guns, the guerrillas and the people-finding devices. It is not a question of a separate reality. It is rather a question of a broader reality.

On August 20, 1970, Morris Udall, U.S. Representative from Arizona's 2nd District, in response to press queries from back home stemming from the plane crash, asked the White House about Marana's CIA status. In a letter to William E. Timmons, Deputy White House Assistant for House Relations, Udall said he thought "most Tucsonans are willing to be left in the dark about secret activities in or around their city" so long as they know their elected representative is privy to the information and has made judgments concerning the public welfare accordingly. "What Mo told them," says his longtime administrative assistant, Roger Lewis, "was that he didn't care if they had a secret base at Marana, but if they did he was the congressman from the district and he ought to know what the hell was going on out there."

A few days later an unidentified high-level CIA staff officer appeared at Udall's office. According to the congressman, the man confirmed that "there is classified work going on for the Agency at Marana." Udall remembers asking if Intermountain's Agency activities were aimed primarily at Latin America. He was told that that was not the case, that it "is just a contract point for outfitting and maintaining aircraft for the CIA generally." According to other sources, however, Udall was told that Marana is indeed a staging, training and operations base and that the CIA not only refits and modifies aircraft there, but also flies missions directly from Marana into other countries.

After the Agency's visit to his office, Udall discussed the interview with the editors who had submitted the original queries, leaving them "with the responsibility of deciding what should be reported in the general interest." He also left them, however, with the CIA staff officer's parting shot, "If we have to close down the facility there, we'll just set up one like it somewhere else."

It apparently convinced the Tucson media. They did not pursue the matter. No further stories on the CIA's activities at Marana ever again appeared in the Tucson press.

Mo Udall, for his part, now considers the Agency's Marana facility "a badly needed economic shot in the arm" for his constituency. "Everybody knows there is a CIA and it carries on worldwide activities," he says, "and some of these activities certainly demand the kind of plane support which results in contracts like those awarded to Marana." He pauses. "No one really likes the kind of clandestine activities engaged in by our intelligence agencies. But, in all honesty, I cannot foresee how we can do without legitimate intelligence work in these perilous times. And since they must be done, I'm happy that some economic benefits accrue to southern Arizona."